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ARTISTS' FILM AND VIDEO

FEAR OF A FLAT PLANET

A revelatory strand at Oberhausen offered multiple perspectives on the unbearable flatness of being in an age of digital alienation

By John Beagles

"How can I see the world as it is if it seems unreal to me? Constantly eludes me. How can I locate a core, an essence in that multitude and that variety of alliances, migrations and transformations in the world of today... How can I make it visible?" These words, spoken by a middle-aged professor played by Willy Thomas in Herman Asselberghs's compelling film *Speech Act* (2011), could have been written with the Flatness series of screenings at this year's Oberhausen Short Film Festival in mind. Expertly curated by Shama Khanna (in conjunction with artists Anthea Hamilton, Oliver Laric and Ed Atkins), this rich, varied and complex selection of work sought to chart the emotional and cognitive effects of our constantly morphing, modulating digital culture of speed and precarity. Understanding flatness as "ontological category, digital morphology and emotional state", Khanna's programme of

screenings mapped a topography that extended Asselberghs's character's sense of bewilderment, exploring a burgeoning desire for agency and change. In more than 50 films, artists such as Phil Collins, Leslie Thornton, Harun Farocki, Hito Steyerl, Pablo Bronstein, Anthea Hamilton, Frances Stark and the Bernadette Corporation charted what it feels like to be always plugged in and always on the hedonic treadmill of our consumerist-entertainment network.

While the idea of flatness as an expression of technologically generated alienation is nothing new (Khanna referenced Robert Bresson's use of a kind of strategic blankness, and Georg Simmel's notion of the blasé springs to mind: "everything appears to the blasé person in an evenly flat and grey tone"), the Flatness screenings pointedly asserted that a tectonic shift has occurred thanks to the digital revolution (insurrection?). For Khanna, the central thematic proposition was that "the time we spend working and socialising behind screens compresses the roundness of real life experience standardising the presence of human emotion into an algorithmic exercise". In part, as the strand's full title, 'Flatness, Cinema after the Internet', hinted, this tectonic shift in the consumption of

images owes much to the internet's privatisation of viewing. The relocation, enlargement and projection of films made on private computer screens into the darkened communal space of the cinema auditorium was a core curatorial strategy to reinstate some of the 'roundness'.

Critically, there were some distinct positions at work in the Flatness screenings. One strand offered an accelerationist, hyperbolic ventriloquising of digital culture, pushing it to the point of implosion (most obviously in Ed Atkins's work); the other was far more sober, detached and analogue in its critical dissection. This was fitting for a programme in which feelings of duality, paradox and incommensurability dominated. It was also again curatorially significant. Legitimising these distinctive responses created productive tensions with regard to the depiction of the tectonic shifts created by digital culture and, perhaps more importantly, the development of a sense of agency in response.

These tensions were memorably played out in Thomas's performance in *Speech Act*. Delivering an impassioned 'lecture' on the visual spectacle of James Cameron's *Avatar*, the character offers an expertly constructed line of Socratic reasoning that deftly deflates Cameron's bloated billion-



Amiga mia: Mark Pellegrino's *G.I.R.L.*

dollar soufflé spectacle. Filming in close-up, Asselberghs's camera circles Thomas's face in anti-spectacular concentration on the mundane features of the human form. Unsurprisingly, watching Thomas's face proved infinitely more compelling and seductive than a Na'vi freefall into 3D space. The rising indignation signalled by Thomas's flickering eyes – like his final confrontational stare into the cinema auditorium – is everything the 'flat' generation is not. If, as the catalogue asserted, "flatness is a lack of subjective expression", then Thomas's character is the intense, impassioned, angry, singular opposite, all rough edges and indigestible bumps.

However, it was hard not to shake the feeling that there was a palpable sense of melancholy in the work. This was an elegy not just to a man out of time but to a man passing out of time, on the verge of extinction. The cinematic figures Thomas's character invokes in his speech (Godard, Pasolini and Antonioni, the triumvirate of canonised avant-garde filmmakers) were like him, the old guard. In her post-film discussion, Khanna referred to *Speech Act* as reactionary, which was a telling description. Certainly, Thomas's character's opposition to the homogenised, flattened spectacle of the 'monster of the mainstream' was unrepentantly Adornian in its critical methodology. The question of whether this kind of position remains tenable today loomed large. Within neoliberal culture, the increasing atomisation of social groups creates forms of cultural apartheid that slice through our cities (a theme expertly plotted in China Miéville's fiction). Thomas's character's critique in places sounded more like a retreat into one of these secure zones, a refusal to engage in the digital conversation. Asselberghs's film also quietly suggested the persuasive, seductive oratory power of the spoken argument had some uncomfortable parallels with Cameron's seductive visual spectacle.

Harun Farocki's unforgettable film *Ein neues Produkt* (2012) could perhaps be best described as a horror film. This documentary records various brainstorming conversations between executives, architects and consultants in German corporations (including Vodaphone) discussing how to radically transform the culture of their working spaces. The corporate hope is that by creating kinds of faux-interactive open-plan hot-desked gaming spaces, companies will 'facilitate' the creation of more productive, self-regulatory workers; or, as one particularly enthusiastic advocate puts it, "at the cost of limiting individualised standardisation-level hierarchies facilitate holistic processes better". These are corporate men – tellingly, only one woman appears – who have a strong sense of themselves as creatives; at one point, one member suggests that "we need a total artwork of leadership conviction". Intercut with such riffing on how to create a fluid, open culture are glacial CGI glides through the open-plan 'fun' offices of the future. Farocki's film, determinedly sober and detached (there's no significant manipulation of the subjects), is masterful in its capturing of the disjunction between the corporate rhetoric of openness in a post-disciplinary framework and the consistent expression of



Helen Marten's *Evian Disease*

a deeply instrumental approach to people as 'units' or things to be exploited. This is a horrific mapping of the forms of soft tyranny now viral and omnipotent within neoliberalism. Gilles Deleuze's notion of "ceaseless control in open sites" is here devastatingly rendered or "made visible". Farocki's film's depiction of the creation of a culture of control seems prescient, revelatory and vital in further developing currently nascent forms of resistance and opposition.

Powerful as Asselberghs's and Farocki's films are, their weighting is resolutely logo-centric. In both, attentive listening to the word is primary. In other parts of the Flatness program, a far more visually and sonically immersive aesthetic of CGI saturation and hallucinogenic morphed forms shifted the modes of attention required of the viewer. This was most obvious in the work of Ed Atkins, Frances Stark and Helen Marten. The 'prosumer' revolution has enabled these artists to use the tools, forms and aesthetics of digital culture against itself, to virally infect the smooth contours and infantilised cutesiness of computer modeling with psychological fractures and bodily desires and appetites.

If, as the critical theorist Franco Berardi has said, the symptoms of dementia are one of the defining characteristics of the effects produced by neoliberalism on its 'cognitive workers', then all the figures in Ed Atkins's work show the symptoms. In his new film *Warm, Warm, Warm Spring Mouths* perfectly rendered CGI bodies (good teeth, good skin, luscious hair) house damaged psyches caught in the process of unravelling and breaking down. In windowless interior spaces, Atkins's mesmerically rendered, immobilised avatars repetitiously mouth banal platitudes: "I don't want to hear any news on the radio about the weather on the weekend." The encounter is nightmarish, akin to conversing with your confused, lost senile grandfather, whose voice emanates from a Brad Pitt shell. The chasm between digital culture's rhetoric of freedom and possibilities and the psychological effects on the minds and material bodies of its consumers was clear – all Atkins's avatars are miserable, depressed, exhausted. Of all the artists in Flatness, Atkins

More than 50 films charted how it feels to be always on the hedonic treadmill of our consumerist-entertainment network



Ed Atkins's *Warm, Warm, Warm Spring Mouths*

appears the most intent on trying to grapple with Berardi's notion that "the mass production of unhappiness is the topic of our times".

Atkins's 'body' of work was key in the Flatness programme in representing an approach to engaging with digital culture that embraces its technological possibilities while retaining something of the distinctive singularity and critically detached analysis of Asselberghs and Farocki. Crucially, Atkins – like Stark, Marten and the other younger artists in Flatness – isn't overwhelmed by the 'monster of the mainstream'. Indeed, despite their inextricable entanglement within and penetration by its logic of zeroes and ones, they demonstrate a pragmatic determination and desire to symbolically neuter its power. For Khanna, the imperative for this strategy arises because "there is something impossible about the situation with no rational way out or option of refusal other than addressing the problem on its own irrational, impossible terms: by meeting flatness with flatness". In Atkins's film, this strategy results in haunting and haunted works where the visceral, corporeal and seductive nature of the aural and visual surface of his work is radically destabilised from within by the mumbling mantras, the dementia. Aesthetically Atkins's film – like much of the best work in Flatness – is, to borrow a phrase from the publishing house Zero books, popular without being populist.

Elsewhere, Pablo Bronstein's *Constantinople Kaleidoscope* (2012) and Mark Pellegrino's *G.L.R.L.* (2012), shown as part of the Toronto-based video-art distribution company V tape's excellent strand, acted as humorous rejoinders to overestimations of the monstrous power of the digital. The lightness of Bronstein's playful, baroque allegory of the rhizomatic structure of the internet (a sliding performance of magical mirrored reflections, complete with 'pantomime ringmaster') and Pellegrino's use of an old Amiga computer to produce an animated history of the early days of internet porn constituted funny, smart deflations of techno terror.

This was a programme that resolutely refuted and undermined the writer Claire Bishop's recent contestation in *Artforum* that contemporary art has "been curiously unresponsive to the total upheaval in our labour and leisure inaugurated by the digital revolution". All the films screened in Flatness were rooted in an engagement in and critical reflection on the range of psychopathologies now highly visible in our culture. ☹